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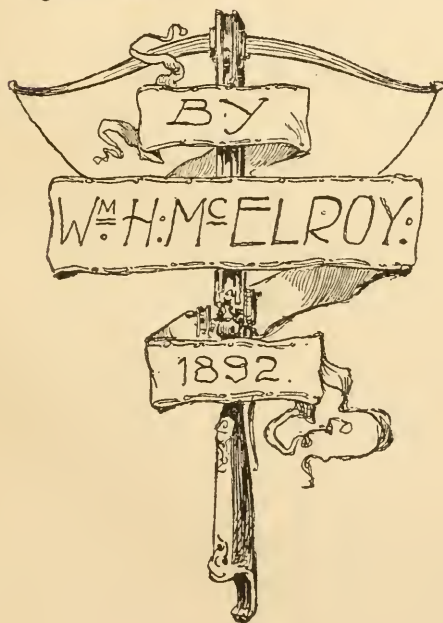
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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.





An Overture
To William Tell.





An Overture to William Tell

BY

WILLIAM H. McELROY



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AN OVERTURE

TO



THACKERAY called "Vanity Fair" a novel without a hero. If we resolve William Tell into a myth, then Switzerland has the unique and rather dismal distinction of being a land without its greatest hero ! It may be contended that the transformation of the man Tell into the myth Tell was accomplished long ago.

But I am not so sure of that, after being here and there in Switzerland. True, the earliest Swiss historians make no mention of Tell. True, all the guide-books—concocted out of Switzerland—inform their patrons that there never was any such person.

True, Baring-Gould, in his "Curious Myths of the Middle Ages," argues that the familiar story of Tell and the apple is a simon-pure fiction, and in order to strengthen his position points out that the analogue of the story is part of the legendary record, antedating their serious history, of several countries besides Switzerland. That is one side of the Tell issue, but there is another. I was at Zurich the other day, and while sauntering through its arsenal was shown the bow with which William Tell "fired the shot heard round the world." And a formidable weapon it is. The bow proper is of steel, the stock is of oak braced with iron, and the great trigger is of iron. You could tell an ox with it—the bow which our old friend Ulysses carried could scarcely have been harder to bend. Why does Zurich keep William Tell's

bow and guard it so carefully? Because of a public sentiment protesting that the bow stands for a fact and not for a fraud. This same sentiment similarly manifests itself at Altdorf. I saw there a statue of heroic size of William Tell. It was erected as late as 1861, on the spot where he executed his immortal feat of marksmanship. It is certain that if any Swiss should attempt to down it, he would be treated by his fellow countrymen as General Dix proposed to treat the miscreant who offered to haul down the American flag. In addition to the bow and the statue, three memorial chapels attest that William Tell is believed in and revered by the Swiss masses. It is not in sane human nature, is it, to erect and perpetuate chapels in remembrance of myths? Two of the three are on Lake Lucerne, and the other is at Burglen, standing on the site of the house in which Tell was born. A man is born, not made; a myth is made. One of those on the lake was erected in 1388. Now the Tell iconoclasts rely largely on the circumstance that "no trace of such a person,"

as Baedeker puts it, "is to be found in the work of John of Winterthur (Vitoduranus, 1340), or that of Conrad Justinger, of Bern (1420), the earliest Swiss historians." But the chapel in question deprives this argument of its significance. The two historians were silent touching Tell, but here was a sermon in stone, nearly as ancient as one of them, and more ancient than the other, testifying that there was "such a person." Obviously, it bears directly and forcibly on the point to inquire how the school-children of to-day, in Switzerland, are taught to regard Tell. In Zurich I purchased recently a school-book (in German) entitled "Historic Picture Book for the Swiss Youth. Third edition. Zurich." One of the historic pictures presented in this elementary work for the instruction of the Swiss youth is the familiar story of Tell's dauntless heroism. Yesterday I borrowed one of the books which the children down here in this village of Weesen study. It has on its title-page—this work also is in German—"The Geography and History of Switzerland, for

Schools and the Home. Lucerne, 1876." Like the Zurich text-book, it treats William Tell as a historic character, and gives whom it may concern to understand that the account of his achievements which have come down from former generations is to be accepted. Its sketch of his career ends with a couplet which may be translated, "The story of Tell should be told as long as the mountains stand on their foundations." I have only to add that it is quite possible that the end of this interesting contention is imminent. For although the Tellites apparently are unyielding, and the anti-Tellites immovable, some such compromise may ultimately be agreed to by both camps as the one which has united some of the Homerites and anti-Homerites of England. These students of Homer, according to one of our witty British brethren, have unanimously resolved that "the poems commonly attributed to Homer were not written by him, but by another man—of the same name."

Switzerland will celebrate her six hundredth birthday this week with befitting pomp and

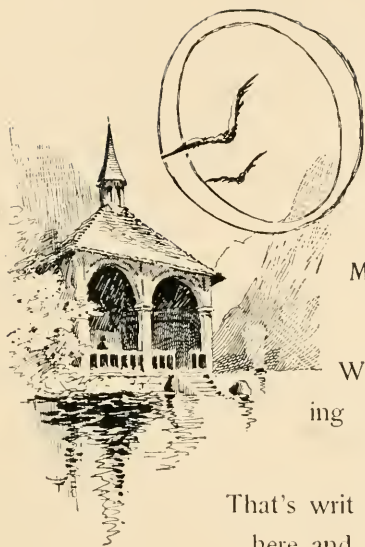
circumstance. A stranger within her gates who resents the ill treatment of a good man, fain would see William Tell rematerialize to the confounding of his implacable enemies the iconoclasts. What more inspiring opportunity for doing so than this great and glorious anniversary ! Hence the Overture to William Tell which follows.

Weesen, Switzerland,

Aug. 3d, 1891.



THE legend of the National hero
of Switzerland is destitute of
historical foundation.—*Baede-
ker's Guide to Switzerland.*



WILLIAM
TELL,

thou of the
champion bow,

Much do I yearn
to know

Whether the thrill-
ing tale that's told
of thee,

That's writ in school-books
here and o'er the sea,

And stirs all freedom's sons where'er they be,

Is genuine, as are these Alpine heights,

Or simply one of fancy's brilliant flights

That's called in that fair land in which we dwell

A sell ;—

Pray tell us, Tell,

Do tell,

Do, Tell !

II.

Wert thou a man, like Brown or Jones or
Smith,

Or, like the bow-boy Cupid, just a myth—

A noble myth,

Of point and pith,

But still a myth?

Hast thy biography no greater worth

Than idlest yarn that e'er was spun on earth,

Which adds not to our knowledge but our
mirth,

Yarn spun by folks who fashion men and scenes

For the marines?

III.

Didst thou with cruel Gessler boldly grapple,

Shooting from off thine offspring's head an
apple,

Causing the arrow—ah, what skill!—to enter

The small fruit's centre?

Or wert thou ne'er in freedom's fight enlisted,
For the good reason that thou ne'er existed ?

Pray tell us, Tell—

Ring falsehood's knell—

Do tell,

Do, Tell.

Be good to history and solve the mystery,
Give to the world thine own, thy truthful version
Of that target excursion.

IV,

'Tis held by Baedeker, that guide so honest,
That thou wert never otherwise than non est ;
He counsels tourists to be sure and label
The epic of thy deeds a cunning fable,

One bound to last

While freedom lives and Alpine peaks stand fast,

A very able,

Aye, a matchless fable,

But still a fable !

V.

And yet, and yet, as all Cook parties know,
Fair Zurich town—fee half a franc—doth show,
With patriotic ardor all aglow,
Among its choicest treasures thy great bow !

A phantom bow?

O no, not so.

But that objective bow, that concrete one,
With which thou halved the fruit and missed
thy son,
While Gessler gnashed his teeth, and felt
undone,

Muttering, "Tell needs no tutor

As a shooter."

What doth that bow, O William Tell, imply
If not that Baedeker doth truth defy?
That what he says of thee is in his eye?
For sure if thou ne'er wert, there could not be
A bow of thine—to that must all agree—

And so

That bow

Just lays the sceptic low.

VI.

Besides, where mountain monarchs grandly rally
Round a fair village of the Uri Valley,

Right there,
In Altdorf's Square,
Its pride beyond compare,

Its toast, its boast, the thing it loves the most,
As pious pilgrims love the Mount of Zion,
As loves Lucerne Thorwaldsen's splendid lion,
There stands a statue of heroic size,
Strength in its limbs and valor in its eyes,
The statue of a man and, mark you well,
O, keen-eyed Baedeker, the man is Tell,

Is William Tell,
Tell, the apple-shooter,
Tell, the Gessler-hooter !

And as the bow of William Tell implied
A William Tell, logicians must decide
That Altdorf's statue clearly presupposes
The self-same man, as rose-leaves call for roses,
Or as a count of noses calls for noses,

Or as the books of Moses call for Moses.
Well may the Swiss, then, sternly put aside
And deride
Baedeker's guide !

VII.

And so the chapels christened with thy name,
If they could have a tongue would fierce exclaim
To the vain vandals who attack thy fame,
“For shame !”

Like statue and like bow each little chapel
Necessitates the cleaver of the apple—
Canst thou not hear them cry, with scorn
and scoff,
“Come off !”

VIII.

But this is not enough, O Tell, for though
Chapel and statue and the Zurich bow,
And every Alpine mount and lake and dell,
authenticate the claims of William Tell,
All is not well

While yet the lusty demon known as Doubt
On every breeze its horrid flag doth flout,
And aims to put thy memory to rout,

To knock thee out.

We pray thee celebrate thy country's birth
By coming back again to Alpine earth.
Come back! come back! upon her birthday
morn,

Top of Mount Blanc or on the Matterhorn
Greet thou her glorious sixth centennial dawn;
Then, on a lightning train to Zurich go

And get thy bow

And shout, in voice that thrills from plain
to plain,

"Ye crags and peaks, I'm with thee once
again,"

To the astounding

And confounding

Of those who'd rob thee of thy dazzling fame;
Come back, O Tell, and stop the sceptic's bark
Reshooting at that mark;

And since 'twould be unfair, in fact, a crime,
To risk a little boy a second time,
It might be well, in view of what he's said,
To place the apple on the sceptic's head—

On Baedeker's head ;

Then, if thou hit'st the fruit, acclaims shall rise

To the skies,

And Baedeker must prompt apologize.

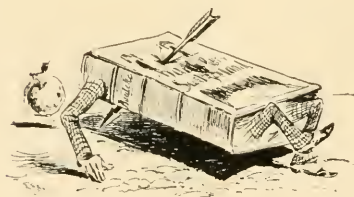
But if the arrow, flying rather low,

Goes through the sceptic's head—but no, not so,

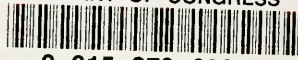
We know

Thy bow,

And 'tis a perfect shame to doubt thy aim!



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